

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5744

As Passed Senate, March 4, 2005

Title: An act relating to mail ballot elections.

Brief Description: Authorizing county-wide mail ballot elections.

Sponsors: Senators Haugen, Berkey, Fairley, Sheldon, McAuliffe, Schmidt, Mulliken and Doumit; by request of Secretary of State.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Government Operations & Elections: 2/14/05, 2/17/05 [DP].
Passed Senate: 3/4/05, 32-16.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS & ELECTIONS

Majority Report: Do pass.

Signed by Senators Kastama, Chair; Berkey, Vice Chair; Roach, Ranking Minority Member; Fairley, Haugen, Kline, McCaslin, Mulliken and Pridemore.

Staff: Mac Nicholson (786-7445)

Background: Elections in Washington are conducted through a mix of absentee voting by mail and poll site voting. Existing statutory authority allows the county auditor to designate precincts with fewer than 200 active registered voters as mail ballot precincts. Some counties have revised all precincts in the county such that all precincts have fewer than 200 active registered voters, thereby turning the entire county into a vote by mail county. Ferry, Okanagon, Clallam, and Skamania counties are all currently vote by mail counties, and Whatcom is in the process of becoming one.

Additionally, special elections not held in conjunction with a state primary or general election may be conducted by mail ballot if requested by the body calling for the special election and agreed to by the county auditor.

Summary of Bill: With express authorization from the county legislative authority, the county auditor may conduct all elections entirely by mail ballot. The county must give at least 90 days notice to the auditor before conducting the first all mail ballot election. Additionally, all registered voters must be notified of the change to an all mail ballot election. If the county and auditor decide to return to polling place elections, 180 days notice must be given.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

Committee/Commission/Task Force Created: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Testimony For: Some counties have up to 85 percent absentee voters, so moving to all mail ballot elections makes sense. This doesn't mandate mail elections, rather it gives counties a local option. Counties will still have disability access voting machines available for use in the county as well as multiple ballot drop off stations where voters can return their ballots. Voter turnout is increased with all mail elections and voters make more informed decisions about candidates and measures. It may make more fiscal sense for counties with electronic voting machines to switch to all mail elections rather than bring voting machines into compliance with a paper trail requirement.

Testimony Against: None.

Who Testified: PRO: Sam Reed, Shane Hamlin, Katie Blinn, Office of Secretary of State; Kim Wyman, Thurston County Auditor; Pat McCarthy, Pierce County Auditor; David Anderson, Your Vote Counts; Bob Terwilliger, Snohomish County Auditor; Chris Stegman, Green Party.